

**REPRESENTATIVE TOM DAVIS, CHAIRMAN  
COMMITTEE ON GOVERNMENT REFORM OVERSIGHT HEARING**

**Hearing topic: “Protecting Our Most Vulnerable Residents: A Review of Reform Efforts at the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency”**

**Friday, May 16, 2003**

**10:00 a.m.**

**Room 2154, Rayburn House Office Building**

Good morning and welcome to today’s oversight hearing on the District of Columbia Child and Family Services Agency (CFSA).

This hearing is a continuation of the Government Reform Committee’s oversight of the child welfare system in the District. During the 106<sup>th</sup> Congress, the Subcommittee on the District of Columbia held hearings to examine the status of CFSA while it was under Federal court-appointed receivership. Last Congress, the Subcommittee continued its examination of the city’s child welfare system with a special focus on the reorganization of its judicial component, the D.C. Superior Court Family Division. Congress worked with D.C. court officials, government, and community leaders to create the DC Family Court.

Last year, I requested a follow-up GAO report on the status of reform efforts at CFSA. Specifically, GAO examined the agency’s performance measures and compliance with the Adoption and Safe Families Act (ASFA), the implementation of key foster care policies, and the relationship between the agency and the Family Court.

GAO’s preliminary findings identify some critical areas that have yet to be addressed by CFSA. For instance, the agency must still comply with ASFA requirements regarding the termination of parental rights, permanency hearings, and notification to participants about hearings and reviews.

Furthermore, I am concerned by the delay in establishing policies related to a child's permanency goals, the licensing of foster homes, social worker visitation, and parental visitations in reunification cases. Also, GAO's findings demonstrate that the agency needs to do a better job of entering data into the FACES case management system to ensure the most accurate and relevant information is available to case workers.

Many of the challenges that CFSA must address are comparable to those faced by child welfare agencies nationwide. They include the recruitment and retention of case workers, foster families, and adoptive families. Our witnesses represent a variety of participants in the child welfare system and can provide insight and recommendations on how CFSA can meet these challenges.

It is a daunting task to rebuild an agency, establish and implement new policies and procedures, and radically overhaul the agency's infrastructure. Since the safety and well-being of children are at stake, this can't happen fast enough. But the agency *has made progress* and I think it is important to highlight its achievements. Based on GAO's preliminary results, I am encouraged by CFSA's efforts to develop written plans to help it comply with some of the ASFA requirements and performance measures. I am also pleased to note the agency's development of numerous foster care policies and, in the case of face-to-face intake interviews, their standards even exceed accepted best practices. Furthermore, CFSA's efforts to lower the number of underage children who are placed in group homes is commendable.

Communication is the first step to ensuring that all components of the child welfare system - CFSA, the Courts, and public and private agencies - work together to achieve the common goal of serving and protecting the city's most vulnerable children. The vital relationship between CFSA and the Family Court is improving and includes regular meetings between the heads of both organizations. And they are working collaboratively to find constructive solutions to problems such as hearing schedule conflicts.

Recently, CFSA met the minimum criteria necessary to end the probationary period and transfer the agency from Federal receivership back to the District's jurisdiction. That was a great step forward for the agency and the city. Now, CFSA has until 2006 to complete the incremental steps laid out in the Final Implementation Plan. So, today's hearing will focus on CFSA's progress and the challenges it faces as it pursues reform efforts. How can CFSA best resolve staffing and operational problems in order to address the critical shortfalls identified by GAO? The agency requires a stable, well-trained, and experienced team. Without solid and consistent staffing levels, the agency reform cannot be accomplished and children will not receive adequate services. While the salaries for social workers in CFSA are competitive, the agency's low employee retention is linked to what many employees perceive is an unsupportive environment. Furthermore, I cannot stress enough my concern about the slow rate at which the agency meets a child's permanency goal. For this very reason, approximately one-third of the children CFSA currently serves are teenagers. Many grew up in the

system. How would they have benefited from a permanent placement? We will never know.

To help us examine these questions, we have assembled a panel of experts who work with the city's abused and neglected children everyday. I look forward to hearing from CFSA and the Court Monitor, as well as witnesses representing the perspectives of legal service providers, private agencies, and foster parents.

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